

## **2004 Wellsprings of Wisdom Conference Impact Report**

### **Purpose of Report**

The purpose of this report is to summarily demonstrate the impacts of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Wellsprings of Wisdom Conference on its participants. The Wellsprings of Wisdom Conference took place at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, June 14-18, 2004. The conference was created by the Community Connections component of the Center for Women's Intercultural Leadership (CWIL) and reflected Community Connections' mission to support diverse women leaders and their community change efforts. The conference explored leadership (seen in the public or private realm) in a holistic way by celebrating diversity, building community, exploring critical issues, and supporting women's health.

### **2004 Conference Overview**

Over 260 women attended the Wellsprings of Wisdom Conference and of that number 100 women participated in a new component of the conference called strands. A strand is a group of sequential morning workshops related to a theme and developed to build up knowledge for the participants on a topic, while developing a community of learners who could continue to support each other after the conference ended. The concept of strands resulted from previous participants' suggestions. Each strand contained ten to twenty women from a variety of backgrounds and lifestyles. The Wellsprings conference offered six different strands, as well as thirty afternoon workshops covering a wide range of subjects presented by over forty-five professionals and experts from around the country. The Wellsprings Conference also sponsored entertainment events during the evenings. The conference was designed so participants could attend one workshop or the whole conference based on their time and interest.

### **Program Evaluation Methodology**

This year's Wellsprings conference underwent a comprehensive evaluation process. Four surveys were developed to evaluate participants' experiences of the overall conference, the workshops, the stands as well as presenters' experience with the conference. (See Appendix A for instruments used.) Workshop assistants distributed and collected the surveys at the end of each strand or workshop. Qualitative data from the surveys was entered into Excel and statistically analyzed in SPSS. An evaluation team, consisting of an Institutional Research Analyst and two of the workshop assistants collaborated to evaluate the qualitative data. A directed theme analysis was done, as well as separate analysis on each survey question. Then the research team conducted a holistic content analysis and collectively agreed upon central concepts that emerged from the qualitative data.

### **Findings**

Four findings of impact emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data collected at the 2004 Wellsprings of Wisdom Conferences: opportunities, connections, self-discovery/ cultural awareness, and empowerment.

## Opportunities

The 2004 Wellsprings of Wisdom conference offered opportunities to women with different needs or intentions for attending the conference. These opportunities included basic social interaction, professional development, personal and professional networking, time for relaxation, as well as conscious and unconscious intercultural experiences. As one woman notes, “it is important to offer the conference because it allows opportunities for women from different backgrounds to meet, socialize, and learn from each other that might not otherwise get to come together.” The diversity of the group in and of itself created an opportunity for different levels of engagement. The conference participants recognized this diversity with 100% of the 149 conference evaluation respondents expressing that it was a *Very Much* to *Somewhat* “diverse” environment. This diversity offered a learning space where women from different backgrounds were able to relate to each other on a one-on-one basis. “The conference gave the opportunity to so many women who could not otherwise receive the information and the fellowship. It was like a learning vacation for me and I had the opportunity to meet and get to interact with women from all walks of life. I had a chance to personally speak to women from the Middle East. This I could not have done any place else.” Wellsprings also offered positive opportunities for professional networking. Of the 46 presenters who responded to the presenter evaluation, 100% said they would present workshops again at future Wellsprings Conferences. Wellsprings provided positive opportunities for personal networking, as well. The personal connections and interaction seemed to stand out as very important for many participants. “The greatest importance for me has been the opportunity to meet all these fantastic women that otherwise I would not have met, being around supportive and cooperative women. All of the speakers I heard were excellent! And they treated us like we were like-minded women. [Wellsprings] has once again excited and strengthened my resolve to become a better individual and citizen. The challenge now is to find some way to maintain this resolve and these connections.”

## Connections

Through these opportunities for interaction and personal development, women were able to make connections on many levels; interpersonal connections, connections to their communities, connections to the materials covered in workshops, and also connections to Saint Mary's College. One woman notes that it is important to offer the conference in order “to bring women together to connect, network, refresh, revitalize, and to see how they can and do make a difference.” Supporting this concept of connection is the 79% of conference feedback respondents who felt *Very* “connected” after the conference. Those women who were involved in the strands indicate an even higher level of connection with 87% of strand evaluation respondents saying they felt *Very* “connected” after the conference. This is due in great part to the continuity offered by five consecutive days of meeting with the same group of women. In support of the new strand concept one woman notes that “we need the continuity of a strand to make closer connections to other women and to delve deeper into issues and into our lives.” Another woman felt the strands were important “for continuity, ability to develop a deeper understanding of a theme, and the ability to get to know other females in depth.” The strands were very successful with 99% of the 94 strand evaluation respondents indicating that they supported the idea of having their particular strand again.

## Self-Discovery/ Cultural Awareness

Women were also able to make personal connections within themselves and with others. Self-discovery and new cultural awareness became an emergent concept. Recognizing their own personal development, 99% of participants who responded to the conference feedback evaluation said that they *Very Much* to *Somewhat* “gained new knowledge or skills” at the conference. In self-reporting a “leadership quality or skill” realized through participation in the conference,

many women responded with insight into their own abilities or an expression of self-acceptance. The responses ranged from “self-awareness” to “acceptance of myself, belief in myself” to “recognizing my own leadership skills.” One woman commented that in coming to the conference “I overcame my isolation, depression and hopelessness.” In addition, to self-awareness, the diverse blend of women at this conference offered many women the chance to experience new cultures. One woman recognized that the conference was important in order “to broaden women’s knowledge of each other, our similarities, differences, and to give us confidence, awareness of who we are and what we can do to make a difference.” Through this broadening of knowledge many women walked away with a heightened sense of cultural awareness. The conference was significant for some because it was able “to open the space to increase communication among diverse members of the community” or “to open diverse women to each other’s gifts and talents.” One woman realized that “knowledge is the first step towards understanding different people and cultures.” And another participant was able to recognize that “I can speak for my own people and also connect well with people from different cultures.”

### **Empowerment**

The Wellsprings of Wisdom conference was an empowering experience for many women as they attended one or multiple workshops and strands. Of the 403 completed afternoon workshop evaluations, 95% of respondents expressed that they were *Somewhat* to *Very Much* more “empowered” after attending the workshop. And of the 94 women who responded to the strand evaluation, 99% felt “empowered.” One woman responded to the question of why it is important for Saint Mary’s College to offer the Wellsprings conference by saying, “It is so rare to find a place that supports women for their own sake. To find like-minded special women in South Bend, Indiana, carries me through the rough spots. I have never found such support and open mindedness and inclusiveness at any other venue. Please keep this up – where else could someone on TANF and food stamps participate in something like this!” Participants felt that the 2004 Wellsprings Conference was “empowering and a treasure for the mind, body, and spirit.”

### **Conclusion**

The findings of both the qualitative and quantitative research from the Wellsprings of Wisdom conference demonstrate a positive impact on the participants. The raw numbers show overwhelming support of the conference and are telling of the participants’ recognition of certain benefits offered by this conference. Yet, it is through the qualitative data that the voices of the participants come out to name those benefits.

The 2004 Wellsprings Conference created **opportunities** for women to experience new ideas and new people. Women developed new **connections** both to Saint Mary’s College and to other women. And through these new connections women experienced **self-discovery**, as well as new levels of **cultural awareness**. Ultimately, women walked away from the Wellsprings of Wisdom Conference feeling more **empowered**. While these findings are not surprising given that the Center for Women’s InterCultural Leadership promotes transformative intercultural engagements throughout all of its activities, it is nonetheless impressive for participants to identify these impacts with their own words.